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SUBJECT: CUBA/ITALY: WE WANT TO BUT WE CAN'T

Classified By: COM Michael Parmly; Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Italian Ambassador to Havana Vecchione said Cuban Foreign Minister Perez Roque's March 15 visit to Rome reached a predictable impasse: Roque wanting to improve relations with Italy, but with conditions unacceptable to the Italians. The Italians, in turn, told Roque to accept the inevitability of democratic change and to release political prisoners, which are non-starters for the Cuban regime. A reported phone call from Fidel Castro to Perez Roque reminding him of Italian Foreign Minister D'Alema's communist youth did not appear to make much difference. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador Domenico Vecchione March 22 provided COM and Pol-Econ Counselor with a readout of Felipe Perez Roque's March 15 visit to Rome. The Cuban had a morning meeting at the Vatican, and then a full day with Italian government and parliamentary interlocutors, capped off by a meeting with Foreign Minister D'Alema. Vecchione said that Fidel Castro called Perez Roque just before that meeting to try to make use of the fact that D'Alema had been active in the communist party in his youth. Highlights as follows:

-- Perez Roque urged the Italians to deal with Cuba only bilaterally, without reference to the European Union.
Answer: Not possible.

-- Cuba was willing to accept bilateral cooperation but with these conditions: Italy needed to renounce the common EU position on Cuba and promise not to vote against Cuba in the UN. Answer: No deal.

-- Vecchione said that Foreign Minister D'Alema urged Perez Roque to "accept the inevitability of change" and help it along. Responding to the Cuban's invitation to visit the island, D'Alema said that would not be possible without clear signals of change, specifically to include release of all political prisoners. Perez Roque agreed to none of this.

¶3. (C) Other issues: Ambassador Vecchione also mentioned that the Cubans were asking for forgiveness of their 440M dollar debt. They also met with Italian tourist operators to seek to reverse the decline (15 percent from 2005-2006) in numbers of Italians who visit Cuba. At roughly 150,000 per year, Italy is in fourth place after Canada, Spain and the UK. Regarding the small group of Italian Radical Party members who protested with the "Damas de Blanco" on March 18, Vecchione said the Italian Embassy was not involved, but was given a heads up by the unofficial CODEL. The group had planned their visit so that the protest was at the end of

their itinerary, getting them to the airport to depart before the GOC could expel them.

¶4. (C) Comment: "We want to but we can't" was how Vecchione described Italy's impulse to improve relations with Cuba. Perez Roque, a Fidel Castro protege who has become the face of next-generation continuity of the communist dictatorship, is not exactly the interlocutor for democratic change. It is encouraging to see that even European former communists have grown up enough to figure that out.
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